



# Dance

## A Reflection of Culture

By Joëlle Walls

Erin Ryan has been dancing since childhood, starting out in competition dance and ultimately finding her way to her future profession at the Central New Jersey Ballet Theater in her hometown in Bordertown, New Jersey.

"My friend took me to a ballet class and I was immediately drawn to this style of dance. I went home and watched almost three hours of ballet on YouTube," said Ryan, currently a sophomore dance major with a ballet concentration at Kennesaw State.

She then enrolled in the pre-professional ballet company led by owner and artistic director Alisha Cardenas. With the company, Ryan's ballet performances included dancing the lead role of Nikiya in *La Bayadère* and Giselle in *Giselle* as well as the Sugar Plum Fairy in *The Nutcracker* and Swanhilda in *Coppélia*. When choosing what university to attend, Cardenas' ties to Atlanta influenced Ryan's decision to move to the Southeast.

"Ms. Cardenas gave me so many opportunities," explained Ryan. "Since she is a UGA alum and from Marietta, she was aware of how amazing the KSU dance program was and suggested that I audition. I flew down for an audition and instantly fell in love with this school and its people. I loved how the KSU dance program focuses on in-studio work as well as academic research. I also received the out-of-state tuition scholarship which allowed me to finalize my decision of attending KSU."

Today Ryan has added undergraduate researcher to her résumé as she embarked on her first independent project



KSU Dance Company member Erin Ryan combines dance and academic research to guide her future.

after ankle surgery sidelined her from dancing during her first semester in fall 2017. With more time available for other scholarly pursuits, she said her dance history class and self-reflecting on her dual identity in society inspired her in pursuing research.

"Since I had to take a step back from the dance community, I was trying to find out who I was and how I got here," she said. "I really began to be comfortable being bisexual. But when we learned about all the famous people in dance history, I started to feel uncomfortable again, questioning if I was the only one, in the room or the profession, who is gay and a dancer. I did not think that was true given the vast number of women in the profession."

After doing some further research on her own, Ryan found, for example, that Josephine Baker, a 1920s musical theater actress, not only had multiple marriages with men, but also relationships with women. Best known for her banana skirt dance in France, this aspect of Baker's private life was downplayed or absent from most media and historical accounts.

"It was during this time period homosexuality wasn't as accepted as it is today. Within the dance community, dancers of diverse races and backgrounds have been added to the canon, yet female homosexuality has been omitted from scholarly research and critiques, dance education and media portrayal," Ryan said. "With my work, I hope to make female homosexuality more visible within the dance profession to decrease homophobia and create an environment that is welcoming to all no matter who they are."

To that end, Ryan pursued this research question that spring as a directed studies project with faculty mentor Meghan Quinlan. Through case studies, including biographies and interviews, as well as movement analysis of choreography in some contemporary dance productions, Ryan researched how homophobic and heterosexist constructs of the dance historical community impacts modern concert dance.

Internally, Ryan then presented her research at the College of the Arts' RadnoculUR series, which features undergraduate research and creative activity in dance, art and design, music, and theater and performance. After Assistant Professor of Dance Sarah Holmes attended the dance showcase, she encouraged Ryan

to also submit her research for inclusion in a special College of the Arts issue of the Kennesaw Journal of Undergraduate Research (KJUR), a peer-reviewed scholarly journal.

"Erin's work is promising scholarship at the undergraduate level," said Holmes, Ryan's current faculty mentor and co-editor of KJUR's special issue. "When students, like Erin, become engaged in their own projects, they engage in the process of learning

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with more personal investment and excitement. I think the College of the Arts is well on its way in establishing undergraduate research like Erin's as another pillar in the college."

Externally, Ryan will present her research at the National Conference on Undergraduate Research that KSU will host in April. She also submitted an application to the American College Dance Association (ACDA) regional conference that will be held at KSU in March. Unlike other research conferences, Ryan will first present her research to a panel of judges at the event, who then select one undergraduate or graduate student to present at the Gala concert at the conference's end.

Upon graduation, Ryan plans to audition with ballet companies and continue with research by eventually pursuing a master's degree in dance studies. "I love performing and the practice, but I also love the academic side – writing and research," said Ryan. "I loved the opportunity to bring the arts into undergraduate research and keep it at the same level as the sciences and history because it is equally important to better our society."

"A culture is reflected in the arts – what people are doing and feeling. We are in a society where I can be a dancer if I so choose," she added. "The art that we create is a reflection of our personal experience and within that, the experience of our culture."